

Review aims to overturn tradition

By Mike Baker

Next month a massive, 640-page report on the future of primary schools will thud on to the desks of ministers and opposition politicians.

There has been nothing on this scale for over 40 years.

In one sense the timing is good. With the general election looming, the political parties are looking for new ideas.

In other ways, the timing is not so good. The public spending squeeze means any proposed reforms will have to pass a strict affordability test.

"Children, their World, their Education" is the final report of the Cambridge Primary Review.

It will make 75 recommendations for policy change in primary education in England.

It is the sort of inquiry that governments no longer undertake. Today's preference is for shorter, more focused and more controllable inquiries.

The public spending squeeze means any proposed reforms will have to pass a strict affordability test.

By contrast, the Cambridge Primary Review made its starting point a fundamental question: "How can primary education best meet the needs of today's children and tomorrow's world?"

We can get a good idea of the direction the Cambridge Review is taking from the many interim reports published during its three-year existence.

Split

For a start, it is likely to call for an overhaul of the national curriculum.

It says the current approach of "the basics and the rest" has led to the core subjects of maths and English being given ever greater prominence while other subjects are now seen as "dispensable".

It has argued that the narrow scope of the primary school tests (the "Sats" at age 11) has been a particular "pressure point" militating against richness and breadth in the curriculum.

Moreover, anticipating objections from traditionalists, the review cites evidence from Ofsted showing that those schools that do best in the "basics" also do well across a broader curriculum.

While the review endorses the notion of a national curriculum, it says it should be split into two: a national component, taking up 70% of the timetable, and a locally determined "community" element filling the rest.

On the controversial issue of testing, the review will urge reform of the narrowly focused, formal tests in maths and English in Year 6. But whatever it proposes in their place is bound to cause argument.

The Conservatives have already upped the stakes in the debate over testing by promising to abolish the primary school Sats and replace them with tests in maths and English when pupils arrive at secondary school.

By contrast, the government, despite ditching the science tests at age 11, insists the Sats will stay.

Tradition

However, the review will not want to be judged simply on what it says about tests. It has tried to take a broader, more innovative approach to reform looking at everything from how children learn to classroom organisation and the design of school buildings.

But history suggests that primary schools will find it hard to escape the customs of the past.

Today's primary school curriculum is remarkably similar to the one officially prescribed over 100 years ago in the 1904 Board of Education regulations: English and maths, followed by science, history, geography, drawing, music and PE.

The major variation in today's curriculum is at the margins, with "manual work/housewifery" replaced by information and computer technology, personal, social and health education, citizenship, and sex education.

There are many other historical legacies, including: the major role played by church schools, the reliance on generalist class teachers rather than specialist subject teachers, the predominance of reading and writing over verbal communication, and the separation of infant and junior stages.

Unsettling

As I found while making the current BBC Radio 4 series *From Abacus to Circle Time: A Short History of the Primary School*, there is an innate conservatism in the form and structure of English primary schools.

The Cambridge Primary Review may find that, for all the weight and depth of its inquiry, it will be unable to break down this attachment to the past.

Our expectations of primary school are probably more rooted in our own personal experiences than is the case for later stages of education.

We do not expect universities, colleges, or even secondary schools still to look the same as they were 20, 30, or 40 years ago.

We accept that technology, new courses and new qualifications will bring changes.

But are we perhaps more easily unsettled by the prospect of change in primary schools?

The Cambridge Primary Review is hoping to overcome this conservatism.

But in an era when central government has unprecedented control over the curriculum, testing and even teaching methods, it will have to persuade the politicians if its proposals are to become a reality.

*Following Mike Baker's three-part history of primary schools, BBC Radio 4 is broadcasting *From Abacus to Circle Time: The Primary School Debate* at 20.00BST on Wednesday 30 September.*

Mike Baker is a journalist and broadcaster specialising in education

Story from BBC NEWS:
<http://news.bbc.co.uk/go/pr/fr/-/1/hi/education/8275583.stm>

Published: 2009/09/26 03:12:26 GMT

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